

The Riel Essay: what's the real story?

CHARLES J.G. VERGE

The name of rebel leader and rehabilitated hero Louis Riel (1844-85) has long been associated with a rare Canadian philatelic item known as the Riel Essay. Although Riel is not portrayed on the unissued stamp, it purportedly was created by the 1869-70 provisional government of Manitoba that he led. This period in Manitoba history is also known as the First Riel Rebellion.

Riel — shown in Figure 1 on Canada Scott 515, a 6¢ commemorative from 1970 — was ambitious, well educated and bilingual, with a charismatic personality that saw him emerge as a leader among the Métis of the Red River Settlement in the region of present-day Winnipeg.

Riel's provisional government would eventually negotiate the Manitoba Act with the Canadian government. The Act established Manitoba as a province and provided some protection for French language rights. Later, in 1885, Riel would lead a Métis rebellion in Batoche, Saskatchewan, with the result that he would be tried for treason and hanged that year.

Although there is no conclusive proof that Riel's government prepared the essay, it has a life of its own in Canadian philately and has enough of a status for the Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation (VGG) to issue

expertization certificates for essays sent in to it.

One example is the previously unrecorded item shown in Figure 2, submitted to the VGG in January 2006 by the Toronto auction house, R. Maresch & Son.

Riel's provisional government included a postmaster general, Andrew Graham Ballenden Bannatyne (1829-89). Bannatyne, shown in Figure 3, was a prominent businessman and Hudson's Bay Company employee and magistrate who had previously been appointed postmaster of the colony in 1862. His provisional government appointment was a continuation of his previous position, albeit after a slight hiatus of a few months after he was sacked in the first days of Riel's government.

Supporters of the Riel Essay use the appointment to support their belief that, with an independent post office, the next logical step was the production of postage stamps. The exact time of production for these essays has never been determined.

At an early February 2006 meeting of the VGG's Expert Committee, I was asked to review the unrecorded red

Riel Essay on newspaper piece in Figure 2, which was submitted for expert review. Although at a glance I believed the essay to be genuine, the focus of my research was on whether the essay belonged on the newspaper fragment on which it was submitted.

For this purpose, I reviewed the philatelic literature on Riel Essays in general and found no reference whatsoever to the item submitted. Most of the material I looked at was provided by Keith Spencer, a noted collector of Riel material and owner of genuine green and red copies of the essay (Figure 4).

In the mid-1980s, Spencer consulted with Bruce Peel, chief librarian of the University of Alberta, and historian Rod McLeod from the same university. Although the concern of all three was to find out whether the essays were genuine and whether they were issued by Riel's provisional governments of 1869-70 in the Red River Settlement, or of 1885 in Batoche, Saskatchewan, their written comments gave additional clues that were extremely useful for my own review.

They mentioned the importance of



Figure 1. Louis Riel, the leader of the provisional government of Manitoba for whom the essays are named, was commemorated in 1970 on Canada Scott 515.

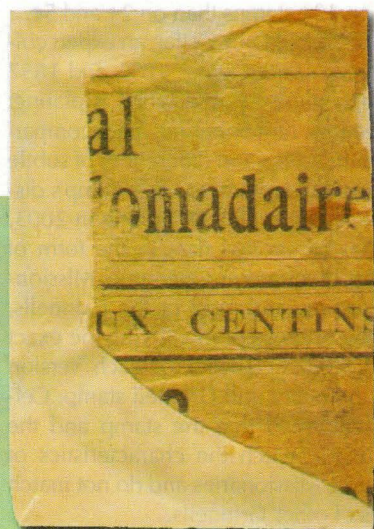
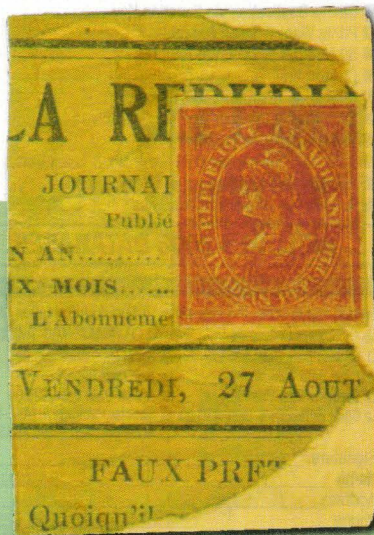


Figure 2. The newly discovered Riel Essay on piece. Although the essay is genuine, it does not belong on the unidentified newspaper fragment.

Courtesy of the Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation.



Figure 3. The provisional government of Manitoba's only postmaster general, A. G. B. Bannatyne.

Alexander Begg's *Red River Journal* and other Papers relating to the *Red River Resistance, 1869-70* (Champlain Society, 1956) and Peel's own book, *Early Printing in the Red River Settlement, 1859-1870*. In addition to studying these works, I consulted with the Archives of the provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba; as well as Library and Archives Canada; and the libraries of the Universities of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

There are a number of clues on the newspaper fragment that could possibly help trace its origin. The information presented here within brackets is presumed to fill in missing text.

The following wording appears on the front of the piece:

- [L]A REPUBLI[QUE] = *The Republic* (name of newspaper)
- JOURNAL HEBDOMAD[AIRE] = *Weekly newspaper* (frequency of publication)
- Publiée tous les vendred[i] = *Published every Friday*
- Vendredi, 27 août = *Friday, 27 August* (date of publication)

The reverse contains these relevant lines:

- [Journ]al [Heb]domadaire =

Weekly newspaper

- [DE]UX CENTINS = *Two cents* (price per copy)

There are a number of reasons why the item could be genuine. The high quality, texture and typeface of this weekly newspaper fragment seem to be consistent with newspapers published at the period and earlier. Later newspapers tended to be produced on more acidic newsprint. The price of the newspaper — deux (two) centins — is also consistent with the price of newspapers of the period. The term *centins*, meaning cents, had become somewhat archaic by that time but was still being used colloquially in Quebec and many other Francophone areas of the world. A weekly publication schedule was the norm for newspapers in smaller jurisdictions.

However, there are more solid historical reasons why the essay does not belong on the newspaper fragment on which it appears.

- Although August 27 was a Friday in 1869, the Red River Rebellion did not start before late October 1869.
- There was no newspaper in Western Canada at the time called *La République*. In fact, I was unable to find any newspaper in Canada with that name in the middle of the 19th century or early 20th century.

- Prior to and during the rebellion there were only two newspapers

published in the Winnipeg/Fort Garry area — the *Red River Pioneer* (later to become the *New Nation*) and the *Nor'Wester* — and they all had spotty publication records during the period of the provisional government.

- If the Riel Essays themselves are a genuine product of the provisional government of Manitoba, most historians believe that they would have been printed in January 1870. This is after the ostensible use of the item under consideration on August 27, 1869. In addition, August 27 was not a Friday in either 1870 or 1885. In any event, for many reasons, it is now virtually certain that the essays, if genuine, were not issued in 1885 during the Second Riel Rebellion.

- There is no record of a Francophone publisher, printer or journalist in the Winnipeg/Fort Garry area at the time. One with a good command of the language would have been needed to produce this high-quality newspaper.

I therefore reported to the VGG Expert Committee that it was my considered opinion that based upon current knowledge, the essay was a genuine red Riel Essay but that it did not belong on the fragment of newspaper it is found on. I believe the newspaper fragment is contemporary to the mid- or late-19th century and is likely taken from a newspaper printed in France or, less likely, another European Franco-



Figure 4. Keith Spencer's red and green Riel Essays.
Courtesy of Dr. Keith Spencer.



Figure 5. The only recorded watermarked copy of the Riel Essay, showing the letters "AT". Courtesy of Don Fraser; photo and scan by Rick Penko.



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almost a comical experiment."

In light of these comments and some of the stories surrounding the Republic, it seems unlikely that it was a serious or determined government ready to issue its own stamps.

The third and most widely accepted theory is the one on which this article is based; namely, that the stamps were produced sometime in early 1870 after Bannatyne was appointed postmaster general of the provisional government. An additional reason for the popularity of this theory is that there was a woodcut artist in Fort Garry at the time.

The fourth theory is that the essays are a product of Riel's second attempt at rebellion in Batoche, Northern Saskatchewan, in 1885 (Figure 6). Since the rebellion lasted but two months and was marred by fighting, it is highly unlikely that Riel's government would have had the time, the interest or the wherewithal to print stamps.

I would like to advance a fifth theory that still needs additional research. I suspect that the essays could have been prepared in the late 1890s, possibly by Winnipeg stamp dealer O. "Original" Kendall.

There are a number of factors to support this. One of the essays on piece is used from Montreal in 1901 or 1902 (Figure 7). The three essays in the Royal Philatelic Collection are mounted on a sheet of paper inscribed "First Issue 1897." The essay in Figure 2 could have been added to a European newspaper of the 1890s. The only relevant years where August 27 occurs on a Friday are 1869, 1875, 1886, 1897 and 1909. It is interesting to note that the 1897 year date matches the date noted on the mounting sheet in the Royal Philatelic Collection.

The origins of the Riel Essays may always remain a mystery, but I am sure they will continue to interest collectors and researchers alike. I would like to hear from any reader who has additional information to share on this subject.

To contribute information about the Riel Essays, write to Charles J.G. Verge in care of Scott Stamp Monthly editorial, P.O. Box 828, Sidney, OH 45365-0828 USA.

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